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ABSTRACT

The Chidley Educational Center, Perth, Western Australia, provides a short term residential environment for 40 children (6-13 years old) with learning disabilities. The children served by the center are admitted because they have limited access, for geographic reasons, to other specialist help. The center's approach is based on the diagnostic process (with evaluations in such areas as psychology, physical education, and behavior) with a pediatrician, psychologist, teachers, housemothers, and child's parents all taking part in the assessment. Since students stay a maximum period of 6 months, the transition component (in which students are weaned off the materials and equipment used at the center and maintain a relationship with the local school teacher) is an important part of the program. Research on the program's efficacy is planned. (SBH)

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AN ATTEMPT TO
PROVIDE AN APPROPRIATE EDUCATION FOR
THE LEARNING DISABLED CHILD FROM REMOTE
RURAL AREAS OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

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The Chidley Educational Center, Perth, Western Australia, provides a short-term residential environment for children with learning disabilities. The Center caters for forty children who satisfy the following criteria :

1. they are in the 6-13 year age range;
2. they are having learning difficulties in their own environment;
3. they have limited access, because of geographic reasons, to other specialist help.

Because of its vast area and scattered population, the problem of the delivery of special education services is a very difficult one in Western Australia. The Chidley Educational Center is an attempt to provide short-term intensive help to the isolated child.

CHIDLEY EDUCATIONAL CENTER

In order to appreciate the reasons for the existence of Chidley Educational Center it is first of all necessary to have some geographic and demographic information about the state of Western Australia, and some knowledge of the administration of education there.

Western Australia is a land of approximately one million square miles, i.e. almost four times the size of the state of Texas. From north to south Western Australia extends almost 2500 miles, while from east to west it is in excess of 800 miles in some places. The population of this area slightly exceeds 1.2 million people. Some 850,000 of this number live in the capital city, Perth, which is situated in the south-western part of the state. The next largest population center is Bunbury (20,000), and there are only six other towns with a population in excess of 10,000. Hence, huge tracts of Western Australia, particularly the arid center, are virtually uninhabited. Many small towns are scattered throughout the state, supporting mining and farming communities.

As in other states in Australia, education is a function of the State Government, with the control of education centralized in the capital city. Although in recent years there has been a trend towards regionalization and decentralization of administration, relatively strong Head Office control still continues over schools, regardless of their distance from Perth. Staffing of schools is a function that is largely centralized. Tenured teachers are expected, if called upon, to serve in any school in the

State. This centralized form of administration has meant that, in principle, communities, no matter where their location, can expect an equal standard of school provision. The range of services offered to the community tends to depend not on the remoteness of the community, nor on its wealth, but upon the size of the school required by that community. Larger schools, with consequently larger numbers of staff and pupil enrolments, have been able to offer specialist services that could not be afforded in small schools. Specialist psychological and remedial services are examples of the services that are difficult to provide in the smaller communities. The State Education Department has instituted three plans to attempt to overcome this great problem of the delivery of services to children who live in remote areas of the state :

1. the regionalization of guidance (psychological) services, with the psychologist providing itinerant services to all schools within the region. However itinerant services may consist of one day in the school in a twelve month period;
2. occasional provision for a team of guidance officers (with perhaps the addition of a remedial teacher) to spend a few days in schools that are experiencing particular difficulties;
3. the opening of Chidley Educational Center.

The Center

Chidley Educational Center, which commenced operations in February 1976, offers a residential and educational environment for children who satisfy three criteria :

1. they are between the ages of 6 and 13 years;
2. they are having learning difficulties;
3. they have limited access, for geographic reasons, to other specialist help.

Physically, the Chidley site consists of the following areas :

1. two cottages, each for twenty children. Children are accommodated in four units of five within each cottage. Three staff also live in each cottage;
2. administration and "learning area" block;
3. gymnasium, swimming pool, and kitchen block;
4. four three-bed units for parents;
5. outdoor play areas, tennis courts, and grassed areas.

As a general rule no child may remain at Chidley for longer than six months, although the opportunity does exist for selected children to return to the Center for up to four weeks, after they have been back in their own school for some months. This opportunity for a "refresher course" has been used no more than ten times in the first three years of the Center's operations.

For the forty children who attend the Chidley Educational Center at any one time, the following professional staff are employed :

principal
 psychologist
 7 teachers
 librarian
 aide
 2 housemothers
 4 residential supervisors
 6 non-residential supervisors.

Other diagnostic and treatment services, based in the community, are used as the occasion warrants. Pediatric, dental, psychiatric and speech therapy services are the main areas covered in this category.

Referral

The primary source of referral to Chidley is the local school. A program of the type offered at Chidley Educational Center can only work if it follows through to the local school when the child returns there. Thus by placing the onus on the local school to refer the child there is a greater likelihood of the local school cooperating in the implementation of a program, when the child returns after his/her stay at Chidley.

At this stage of the Center's development the referral procedures are somewhat vague and subjective. They are often based on the concern of the local school that a particular child is a problem to them. While this is a legitimate cause for referral, the Chidley staff are trying to encourage more referrals on the basis of "this child is not realizing his/her potential". However, as the help available to small country schools from other sources is often non-existent, Chidley accepts a number of referrals on the basis that the child is a problem to the local school and no other agency is getting involved.

The Students

The purpose of the Center is to assist country children who otherwise would not have access to special education facilities. Although children from anywhere outside the metropolitan area of Perth are eligible for

admission, the Center's facilities limit the throughput in any one year to about 110. Priority is given to the isolated child from a station (ranch) or road construction camp who has no access to specialist help. Typically, such a child is learning by correspondence, perhaps with support from a School of the Air. Five Schools of the Air have been established to transmit lessons by radio to isolated students. The Federal and State governments have jointly mounted a program to provide powerful two-way transceivers to families living in outback areas. Approximately six percent of the Center's intake consists of this group of children who do not attend school in the normal fashion.

Children from small country schools with mixed grades are selected next for admission. Approximately twenty-two percent of the Chidley intake is drawn from these schools with less than 100 pupils. More children from these smaller schools are being referred to Chidley and it is anticipated that their representation in enrolments will increase considerably.

Third on the list comes the child from a larger country school, where the principal and teachers consider that more detailed assessment and small group participation might be necessary to supplement their own efforts. Currently around sixty-eight percent of the Chidley enrolment is drawn from these larger schools, but this figure is decreasing. It should be pointed out that the mean size of these larger schools is about 200 pupils.

The children who are admitted to the Center reflect a variety of problems. About seventy-five percent of the intake would be children of average ability who are performing at eighteen months or more below their age level

in reading and/or arithmetic. Some ten percent are children who could be labeled Educable Mentally Handicapped. About five percent of the children who attend Chidley are gifted under-achievers. A further five percent are those children whose educational problems are compounded with socio-emotional factors. Chidley is not seen as the ideal setting for these children, because of the lack of opportunity for meaningful intervention in the home environment. However, if no other help is forthcoming the Center will get involved. The final five percent consists of those children for whom longer term intervention is deemed necessary. Perhaps the child might benefit from attending a special school, but he/she has been placed in the regular class, possibly because the parents had been unwilling to concede that the child had severe learning difficulties. Often it is only when the differences between the child and his/her peers becomes conspicuous that the parents realize that they must come to terms with the situation. Chidley assists by accommodating the child and the parents while they explore the special schools in Perth, and by carrying out an assessment of the child's learning difficulties.

The Program

A new student comes in to the Center as a vacancy arises, so that there is a relatively constant flow of children in and out throughout the school year. There are seldom more than four new students in a week, except at the beginning of the school terms - February, May, and September. New students, therefore, enter an already established social situation, and are

often supported by the happy and settled atmosphere. The "experienced" students generally are quite sensitive to the newcomers' feelings of homesickness, and often help to diminish the problems of adjustment.

The foundation of the whole Chidley approach is the diagnostic process. Once a child has settled in to the new environment an intensive period of assessment begins. While it is accepted that assessment, to be meaningful, needs to be ongoing, the major components of the process, for planning purposes, are carried out in a four day period. The starting point of the assessment is a complete medical examination carried out by a pediatrician. Where necessary children can be referred on for further specialist investigation and treatment. The psychologist uses whatever assessment instruments, including observation, that seem warranted for that particular child. Each teacher is responsible for the diagnosis of the nature of the problems of the six children in his/her class. However, the open-plan nature of the learning areas provides ample opportunity for other staff to observe the child and perhaps make an important contribution to the assessment of the needs of the child in another teacher's class. Teachers have access to a comprehensive battery of diagnostic tests, often supplemented by instruments they have designed themselves. Another component of the assessment is a physical evaluation. The physical education specialist completes a comprehensive assessment of the physical abilities of each child. The housemother whose cottage the child is in, is required to record the behavior of the child as a further component of the assessment process.

A vital part of the assessment of a child's educational needs is contributed by the child's parents. While the Center can not (other than in exceptional circumstances) provide travel expenses for parents to come to Chidley, it does provide meals and accommodation for parents for a nominal amount. However, it is policy to encourage parents to come and spend some time at Chidley, if it is at all feasible. It is suggested to parents that they can play a meaningful role in both the assessment of their child's needs, and in the design and implementation of a program to attempt to meet those needs. Several rooms at the Center are equipped with observation windows and/or remote-control video facilities. In some situations the parent will carry out some of the assessment procedures with the teacher or psychologist helping or observing. The presence of one or both parents at the Center has proved to be a very rewarding experience for the staff, the parent, and the child. That the parents of the children who come to Chidley Educational Center are concerned about the education of their children is evidenced by the fact that in the first three years of the Center's operations, seventy percent of the children had one or more of their parents living at the Center for one or more weeks. It must also be pointed out that, in more than one instance, it has been the parent who has provided the information that was crucial to the assessment.

The culmination of the assessment period is a case conference involving the parents and everybody who has been working with the child. Experience has shown that a parent, or parents, are not usually daunted by the presence of a comparatively large number of professional personnel, if they have been working with those professionals during the previous few days. The

dual purposes of this conference are to :

1. integrate all of the assessment information;
2. draw up an individualized educational plan for the child.

The role of the parents is seen as being of paramount importance, both in terms of assessment and in relation to helping structure an educational plan for their child.

Transition

As mentioned previously the maximum period of time a child may stay at Chidley is six months. In fact, the average length of stay is about five months. In the last two weeks of the child's stay in the Center he/she is weaned off the materials and equipment used at the Center, and put back on to materials that can be used in the local school. It should be noted that this does not necessarily mean the use of materials that have already brought failure to the child. The child's teacher at Chidley maintains communication with the local school throughout the duration of the stay at Chidley, and is aware of the materials that are available in the local school. If the local school does not have materials that seem suitable for the child Chidley acts as a resource center and will provide material for the school, for use with that child.

The most important component of the transition process involves the teacher the child will have when he/she returns to the local school. Efforts are made to get that teacher to come to Chidley for the last two weeks of the child's stay. Throughout that two week period the local teacher works intensively with the Chidley teacher, and together they structure a plan

for teaching the child back in the local school. One of the important aspects of the teacher's stay at Chidley is that it provides him/her with a source of support back in the local community. Once the teachers return to their local schools (which may be 2,000 miles away) they have contact people at Chidley, with whom they have been working. In a small way this helps to alleviate some of the isolation of professional life that country teachers often feel.

Currently seventy percent of the children leaving Chidley have their local teacher taking part in the transition scheme detailed above. For the remaining thirty percent, the Chidley staff spend a lot of time

1. talking to the teacher on the telephone, and
2. compiling for the local teacher a detailed program
for the first four weeks of the child's return.

Teachers in the local schools are asked to maintain regular contact with Chidley, if the child needs ongoing help that they cannot provide.

The Future

The greatest deficiency associated with the Chidley Educational Center is the lack of research as to its efficacy. When the Center was opened in 1976 the lack of a research component was by design. The concept of Chidley was a new one, and it was felt that there were many problems inherent in embarking on an undertaking which had no established precedent. Thus it was decided to spend the first two years in establishing the Center and refining its procedures, before commencing research. During the second year the

Principal departed overseas on study leave, and an Acting Principal has been running the Center. Upon the return of the Principal in mid-1979 a three-year research project will be planned. The major emphases of the research will be :

1. what happens to the children who attend Chidley, after they return to their local schools?
2. is the type of approach adopted at Chidley more suitable for children of a particular age, with a particular type of problem, than it is for other children?
3. is the Chidley approach a cost-effective one?

Chidley Educational Center came into being because of the particular circumstances that exist in a large area with a very scattered population. As the population in the country areas grows, so will a greater variety of facilities be provided. Thus at some stage in the future it is possible to think in terms of sufficient provision being made in the local areas, so that a Center of the Chidley type becomes unnecessary. However, research MAY show that mildly handicapped students can be more effectively served by a short period of withdrawal from the regular classroom, in order to provide a period of intensive assessment and individual teaching, than they can be by, say, a resource consulting teacher. If research does provide such a finding, the implications of the approach espoused at Chidley could be widespread.